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# **‘Diabolical indigestion’: Forms of Distaste**

## **in Wyndham Lewis’s Body of Work**

[winner of the 2015 Wyndham Lewis

Memorial Trust Essay Prize]

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Early on in the 1918 edition of *Tarr*, Lewis’s protagonist, Frederick Tarr, pays a visit to the cramped dwelling of his German fiancée, Bertha Lunken, to break off their engagement. In an attempt to keep relations amicable he brings food with him, and when she becomes upset he introduces the formality of the meal to soak up Bertha’s ‘psychic discharges’ (*T1* 60). Tarr uses food to reinforce his own self-absorption, but after finding himself unable to prevent Bertha from seeping into his thoughts, he reacts with masticatory aggression:

To cover reflection, he set himself to finish lunch. The strawberries were devoured mechanically, with unhungry itch to clear the plate. He had become just a devouring-machine, restless if any of the little red balls still remained in front of it.

Bertha’s eyes sought to carry her out of this Present. But they had broken down, depositing her, so to speak, somewhere halfway down the avenue. (*T1* 70)

Ironically, Tarr appropriates eating as a means of thwarting the act of rumination; his transformation into a mere ‘devouring-machine’ is a defence mechanism against the painful indigestion of suppressed feelings. Torn between his desire to assimilate his lover into his life, and his desire to detach himself from her entirely, Tarr’s indecisiveness leaves Bertha feeling only partially digested. Although she has been ‘broken down’ and deposited, Bertha finds herself stuck ‘halfway down the avenue’, lodged in the gullet of this painful process of ‘disengagement’ (*T1* 43). The oxymoron ‘unhungry itch’ evokes a further threshold state, with Lewis placing the ‘itch’ of Tarr’s body in tension

with the self-discipline of his 'unhungry' mind. As well as evoking a Cartesian dualism, Tarr's attitude towards food materializes an inner conflict between his desire for autonomy and his need to obtain a sense of mastery over his external surroundings.

At first glance the ingredients of this scene are all too familiar: a distracted artist breaks off his affair with a needy partner, leaving her in pieces. Yet like his mouthpiece Tarr, Lewis is also dis-engaging himself, in this case from the social conventions of the realist novel. By substituting a soundtrack of mastication for a lover's tiff, Lewis pulverizes formal expectations. Starved of the release of tension through a direct confrontation, instead the reader is served up a diet of bathos in the form of 'little red balls', natural objects that have been ontologically castrated (like Tarr perhaps) from their form and function. The curious prominence of this 'unexpected fruit' (RA 126)<sup>1</sup> produces an atmosphere of unbearable indeterminacy: just as the strawberries have more claim on Tarr's attention than his fiancée does, so is this overcharged atmosphere designed to induce feelings of disorientation and even nausea.

*Tarr* is full of tense and claustrophobic eating scenes.<sup>2</sup> Amid stale domestic interiors and rundown restaurants, characters stuff themselves full of food despite not feeling hungry, their outsides belying the demands of their insides.<sup>3</sup> After receiving a copy of the text, W. B. Yeats wrote to Lewis, commenting favourably on 'its curious, almost unconscious presentation of sex, those mechanical images and images of food – there also is mechanism, unites itself in my mind with so much in contemporary painting and sculpture. There is the feeling, almost Buddhist, that we are caught in a kind of steel trap' (Yeats quoted in RA 137). By embracing the uncomfortable sensations brought on by the defiance of social norms, Lewis suggests that individuals can wrestle themselves free of the constraints of their surroundings and reclaim a degree of autonomy. Ian Patterson argues that for Lewis 'discomfort is a mode of knowing'.<sup>4</sup> In particular, indigestion is often bound up with a heightened level of self-awareness that can be liberating as well as disabling.

Throughout *Tarr*, eating is an act of weakness and conformity, with food frequently figured as an object of revulsion. Julia Kristeva observes in her study of abjection that, although food is a source of bodily strength, it is during the act of eating that we recognize our vulnerability, with the boundaries of selfhood undermined by such

bodily exigencies.<sup>5</sup> Lewis's *oeuvre* is formed out of an underlying anxiety that manifests itself as both a fascination with and revulsion towards bodily processes. As I will go on to explore, Lewis's reputation for recalcitrance is ultimately a defensive strategy: his writing career is largely a reaction against the powerful social, political, and artistic forces of the first half of the twentieth century. In his attack on the main currents of modernism, *Time and Western Man* (1927), Lewis concedes: 'our only terra firma in a boiling and shifting world is, after all, our "self." That must cohere for us to be capable at all of behaving in any way but as mirror-images of alien realities' (*TWM* 132). Shifting and boiling, in the context of dissolution, may be conceived as a digestive process, a cellular breakdown that undermines the boundaries of the self. Here the underlying fear is that of being dispersed by external processes and rendered indistinct by the social and ideological forces that determine collective reality. For Lewis, the self is under constant threat from what Deleuze and Guattari term the 'molar' apparatus of modern form production, what Yeats refers to as the 'steel trap' of modern life.<sup>6</sup> The attempt to 'cohere' a firm sense of self, to not be broken down by the jaws of external pressures, is thus the driving impetus behind Lewis's work.

Throughout Lewis's body of work, distaste is a form of protest. Amid hostile surroundings, characters often experience a sense of revulsion or a lack of appetite before meals, and many are nauseous or even sick after eating. The act of negation plays a pivotal role in our attempts to attain a sense of mastery over the external world. Sigmund Freud describes infant world-formation as primarily a negative process that is determined orally.<sup>7</sup> Pierre Bourdieu develops this idea in his argument that, 'more than anywhere else, all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the taste of others'.<sup>8</sup> There is often the sense in Lewis's work that meaning can only be generated out of the struggle and inevitably the failure of the text either to absorb its reader or to assimilate the external world by breaking it down into bite-size chunks for easy consumption. In a letter to an aspiring novelist Lewis wrote: 'I at once become bored in a story when I feel that situations and events are being doctored, trimmed up, falsified and cooked' (*L* 512). I am interested in the various ways in which distaste develops into a reactive strategy over the course of Lewis's career. The protean body of Lewis's fiction passes from avant-garde experimentation into political

satire, before shifting into traditional realism and re-emerging into allegory. This, I will argue, is the result of Lewis's search for a solid and impermeable vessel for his ideas, coupled with his struggle to maintain a sense of aesthetic distance between himself and his chosen form of representation.

Paradoxically, the creative energy that sustains Lewis's body of work is generated by a tendency towards self-destructiveness. Regardless of the biographical overtones of much of his writing, and despite the fact that his texts are undoubtedly the product of a singular mind, Lewis's frequent shifts of genre suggest a resistance to the notion of a stable and coherent artistic identity. Lewis's concerted effort to undermine the possibility of a unified body of work through acts of textual self-resistance generates an intriguing dialectical tension. Just as digestion entails the assimilation of an external object into an internal system, Lewis's absorption of material from the world into his body of work resembles a series of violent peristaltic spasms. In accordance with much of the criticism on Lewis, I have separated his fiction into three distinct phases.<sup>9</sup> What follows is a study of the metabolic rates of Lewis's writing that seeks to determine the nature of intake, textual processes, and literary (as distinct from painterly) output. Although his body of work does not lend itself easily to a digested read, by recognizing the value of this resistance it may be possible to render the experience of reading Lewis's *corpus* more palatable.

### **'raw rich visual food': Lewis's Early Phase**

The sheer density of Lewis's early output, what Chapman terms the 'thick and glutinous' style of 'Bestre', and Kenner the 'lumpier patches' of *Tarr*, achieves a unique formal quality by going against the smoother currents of narrative convention.<sup>10</sup> Lewis's struggle to thwart the procedures of nineteenth-century realism by materializing the textures of contradiction generated by social interaction grants his early writing an agonistic flavour. One early story, 'A Soldier of Humour' (1917), consists not only of a fierce struggle with a mysterious local, but an ongoing 'battle with the menu' (*CWB* 326). In 'Bestre' (1909) a recalcitrant host partakes in a series of feuds with his neighbours, initiating hostile staring contests from his kitchen window. Aware that

he is a kind of meal to be consumed by the curious gaze of his guests, Bestre approaches a local artist and his wife as 'war-food' (CWB 84).

In his career-memoir, *Rude Assignment* (1950), Lewis recalls the circumstances that inspired these tales. Later published as a collection entitled *The Wild Body* (1927), Lewis recalls how they were formed out of the rough textures of the 'rocks and stone hamlets of Finisterre' (RA 122):

Long vague periods of an indolence now charged with some creative purpose were spent in digesting what I saw, smelt and heard. For indolent I remained. The Atlantic air, the raw rich visual food of the barbaric environment, the squealing of the pipes, the crashing of the ocean, induced a creative torpor. Mine was now a drowsy sun-baked ferment, watching with delight the great comic effigies which erupted beneath my rather saturnine but astonished gaze: Brotcotnaz, Bestre, and the rest. (RA 125)

It is possible to observe a curious disjuncture between Lewis's recollections of how he eagerly glutted himself with the material of his early short stories and the fact that the 'primitive food' in these tales arouses a 'dyspeptic storm' (CWB 334) in the body of his protagonist, Ker-Orr. It is discrepancies such as this that expose Lewis's efforts to assimilate the raw textures of his external surroundings while also reacting violently against his own practices.

The dominant mode of observation in *Tarr* and the early stories is the extreme close-up. Lewis's characters are often made out of grotesquely amplified features: Ker-Orr's 'large strong teeth' (CWB 323); Bestre's 'very large eyeballs' (CWB 78); Otto Kreisler's 'long round thighs' (T1 84). In his study of the still life, the art-historian Norman Bryson argues:

Instead of plunging vistas, arcades, horizons and the sovereign prospect of the eye, [the still life] proposes a much closer space, centred on the body. Hence one of the technical curiosities of the genre, its disinclination to portray the world beyond the far edge of the table. [...] That further zone beyond the table's edge must be suppressed if still life is to create its principal spatial value: nearness.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis shares this ‘disinclination’ and yet his narration often seems nauseated by its own fixation, disgusted by its own nearness. When he criticizes Sartre’s ‘cyclone-aesthetic’ several decades later in *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952), Lewis could easily be describing his own methods:

what this fragmentary peepshow may gain in sensational intensity, it loses in the more comprehensive satisfactions which intensity rules out (or perhaps intensity is not the word but a technique of the naïve close-up). Though it may feed – perhaps over-feed – the senses, it starves the intellect. (*W&A* 84)

For Lewis, while observation is a form of mastery over the external world that demonstrates the triumph of mind over matter, being fed relegates the individual to a passive receptacle, subject to the vicissitudes of production and consumption. In order to take in its surroundings the eye requires distance, yet Lewis’s still life method operates to the detriment of distance and depth of field; by restricting the gaze it occludes a broader perspective. While the detailing of prominent features appears to be the result of detailed observation, the narrator is often positioned too close to the subject in view. Just as the sensation of taste relies on extreme proximity to an external form, Lewis’s foreshortening of reality materializes his struggle to achieve aesthetic distance. It is possible that Lewis felt unable to transcend the physicality of his early encounters, and was therefore compelled to foreground the threatening and intrusive nature of social interaction. However, just as Tarr’s attentiveness to his own teeming plate-world is a tactical means of ‘cover[ing] reflection’, Lewis’s use of the ‘naïve close-up’ appears to be part of a concerted effort to thwart the panoptic procedures of realism.

In the Lewisian universe, extreme closeness to the outsides of individuals is countered by extreme distance from their interiority. Because Lewis is primarily interested in presenting the surface of life, the reader is positioned at a remove from the consciousness of characters, left to feel his or her way through the rough exterior of the text for hints of internal rupture (see *BB* 9 and *ABR* 231). The result is a sense of being provided with too much detail and too little insight, and this pattern of providing and withholding information continues throughout his writing. The early texts oscillate violently between glutting us with detail and starving us of information, in turn generating

a high level of epistemological discomfort. This discomfort extends to the reading experience, with the onlooker asked to consider the extent to which these unsettling effects are the mark of eccentric characterization, and to what degree they are the mark of authorial intransigence.

Certainly, an antisocial tendency marks Lewis's early writing that can be partially explained by his own estimations of how, as a young man, he remained, 'beyond the usual period, congealed in a kind of cryptic immaturity' (RA 126). In the process of seeking out 'primitive' situations the young writer went on to have experiences that could not be assimilated into normal social contexts. At one point Lewis recollects how, lacking an appropriate outlet, he would suddenly 'erupt [...] with intensity, and with the density of what had been undiluted with ordinary intercourse' (RA 126). The violent physicality of this metaphor suggests that Lewis's greedy pursuit of experiences that exceeded the parameters of social convention may have exacerbated an already bilious temperament. A disdain for 'ordinary intercourse' is particularly apparent in Lewis's early story, 'Unlucky for Pringle' (1911). Like Lewis, James Pringle has recently returned to London from Paris and is eager to continue drifting between temporary lodgings, passing through the city and 'savour[ing] the particular domestic taste of each new household' (CWB 299). To his surprise, Pringle begins to feel at home with a hypochondriac French chef and his wife, and is soon taking all of his meals with them. One day he is caught peering into one of Monsieur Charlaran's pots and the atmosphere quickly sours. His host falls ill in protest and Pringle is made to feel increasingly unwelcome at meal times. The narrator, purportedly a friend of Pringle, concludes: 'Anyhow, this house *would* vomit him forth; it could not assimilate him. Glasses crashed down at its doors as he was entering; its inhabitants became filled with mysterious hatred for him' (CWB 311). By resisting absorption and remaining in motion, Pringle avoids getting to know the insides of others. Like Bertha's cramped living space, the house is figured as a malfunctioning digestive tract. Pringle's resistance to the peristalsis of domestic life signals his attempt to retain his identity amid oppressive social surroundings.

One way in which Pringle avoids being engulfed by his surroundings is by embracing the principle of brevity, dining out on the very form in which he is contained. The story ends abruptly after Pringle's expulsion, confirming that his resistance to being assimilated extends to



his textual surroundings. This sense of narrative rupture enables Lewis to continue to thwart epistemological processes, allowing the origin of the couple's hatred to remain 'mysterious'. Unless 'peering into one of his pots' (*CWB* 307) is a euphemism for some kind of erotic curiosity or bodily trespass, it is unclear why Pringle's handling of Charlaran's cooking implements would cause such offence. Clearly Pringle's presence has become invasive, as though he has quite literally lifted the lid on something simmering beneath the surface of the home. The narrator, who is relating these events second-hand, describes how on one occasion Pringle brings up sex at the dinner table and Charlaran, in an echo of Tarr's behaviour during his lunch with Bertha, 'had shown his displeasure and discomfort by eating up hastily everything within reach; as a man might stop his ears, [he] stopped his mouth' (*CWB* 308). Lewis suggests that the Charlarans are constipated by their own rich diet of repression and self-absorption. Being as he is lodged in the innards of their home, Pringle is identified as the source of the blockage – he is their alimentary scapegoat.

Lewis positions Pringle as an abject substance that cannot be disposed of easily. Yet the process of abjection works both ways, with the sense of discomfort that Pringle feeds on turning back on him like a digestive system in reverse when he unpacks his possessions. Lewis would later reuse the scene in which Pringle disgorges the 'squashed and wrinkled' (*CWB* 304) contents of his portmanteau almost verbatim.<sup>12</sup> The resurfacing of vomited personal effects in *Tarr* is deliciously ironic: just as the objects contained within the portmanteau in 'Unlucky for Pringle' have 'the staleness of the former room about them' (*CWB* 304), the regurgitation of this analogy in a later text compounds the sense of ontological staleness. There are other parallels between the two protagonists: the verb 'pringle' means 'to prick, tingle', and while Tarr's name is reminiscent of the thick sludgy substance that coats the lungs of a smoker, 'tar' also means 'to irritate, vex, provoke' (OED). Just as both men function as irritants, they also suffer the same fate that they inflict on others. When faced with their vomited possessions, Pringle and Tarr are both overcome by the 'indigestion of Reality', with the narrator explaining in both cases how each man 'was very fond of reality; but he was like a man very fond of what did not at all agree with him' (*CWB* 304; see also *T1* 204). In each instance Lewis foregrounds a feeling of incompatibility between subject and object, self and world,

and the resurfacing of this insight over time is suggestive of the author's anxious rumination over this issue.

There is further evidence of this unresolved anxiety in the 1927 version of 'A Soldier of Humour', another text that is returned to and reconstituted by Lewis. In the hotel restaurant of the 'Fonda del Mundo', Ker-Orr looks down at a piece of fish on his plate that his palate has rejected, fixating on 'the markings of [his] white teeth all over it, like a cast of a dentist' (CWB 22). As with the portmanteau, the porosity of an external form induces proto-Sartrean nausea, with Ker-Orr faced with the existential dread of the contamination of self and other. Invoking Sartre's account of existential dyspepsia, Steven Connor argues that, in the work of a similarly misanthropic modernist, Samuel Beckett:

embodiment takes the form of a nausea, a proximity-to-self that can neither be purged nor absorbed. For both [Beckett and Sartre], alimentation is the way in which notions of embodiment and worldedness are "existed". Existence is indigestion.<sup>13</sup>

The contents of the portmanteau are Pringle's (and later Tarr's) possessions exhibiting a strong proximity-to-self, bearing the teeth marks of personal use. The indelible mark of the subject's teeming closeness deprives the object of its autonomy, exposing its ontological porosity. By scaling up this model from the molecular to the molar level, it becomes apparent that Lewis is gesturing to the residual scars left on his protagonists by the larger social and political forces that, as he puts it in *The Writer and the Absolute*, seek to 'compress people in one mould' (WA 47).<sup>14</sup> Pringle's and Tarr's sense of staleness is thus an encounter with sameness on both a micro and a macro level: just as the assimilated object loses its difference and becomes a mere 'cast' of the self, so do these objects bear witness to a failure to overcome the transitory and impoverished lifestyle, a failure that plagues author and protagonist alike.

Perhaps the portmanteau crisis is less about socio-economic oppressiveness than it is about formal anxiety. Fredric Jameson argues that in his early writing Lewis is commenting:

not only on the increasing reification of social life, but also on the exhaustion of form, on the way in which the older realistic para-

digests ceaselessly consume their own primary material and render it obsolete. [...]

A modernism such as that of Lewis must therefore adopt a kind of second-degree or reflexive, reactive strategy, in which the blurred outlines of the older narrative paradigm or proairetic unity remain in place, but are violently restructured.<sup>15</sup>

Jameson's impression of modernism's reliance on the ingredients of traditional realism has a parasitic edge, and contains the troubling implication that Lewis is merely feeding on the stale carcass of realism. While this reading brings Lewis's methods to the surface, it also suppresses his motivation. Jameson's central claim is that Lewis is attempting to transcend the raw materials of narrative. In fact, it is the opposite impulse, the attempt to maintain the rawness of these materials by resisting processes of assimilation and textual digestion that prompts these violent methods.

To transcend the raw materials of narrative would be to deny the reality of the limitations of form, both textual and corporeal. In *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), Lewis makes his struggle with the form of his first novel clear:

*Tarr* was not "constructed", as the commercial pundit calls it. It did not conform to the traditional wave-length of the English Novel. There was not a lot of soft padding everywhere, in other words, to enable the eggs to get safely to market, [...]. Indeed they were *not* eggs. They were more like bullets. (BB 88-89)

Here Lewis confers a degree of autonomy on to the text by suggesting that it has avoided being either reduced to a mere comestible or sublimated into the realm of realist artifice. The very fact that the text, rather than its creator, is the active agent of this analogy implies that it may even have overcome the mastery of Lewis himself. In its refusal to 'conform', *Tarr* triumphs over its material surroundings by developing a hard outer shell that can penetrate its surroundings while remaining somehow invulnerable. By negating the act of construction, Lewis turns to the powers of destruction, directing anxieties of self-formation and 'persecution mania' (T1 45) outwards in a series of vicious attacks. Satire defines itself negatively through processes of opposition and exclusion.

Lewis's main course comprises aggressive embodiment and vicious parody that makes a meal of the enemy.

### **'the politics of *Revolt*': Lewis's Main Course**

Hugh Kenner traces Lewis's 'revulsion with the social' back to *Tarr*, but it was in the aftermath of the First World War that the author felt compelled to turn to what he would later term the 'purgative processes of satire' (*WA* 13).<sup>16</sup> The concept of satire partly derives from the Latin *farcimen*, which means stuffing or sausage. As well as revealing the associations of this genre with feasting, this curious etymology presents satire as a form of sustenance and gestures to the semantic distortions that are entailed by acts of artistic consumption.<sup>17</sup> However, as Robert C. Elliott notes, in the era in which Lewis was writing it would be difficult to glut oneself on the sausage of satire: 'one could hardly call the twentieth century an age of great satire, or think of its leading authors as pre-eminently satirists'.<sup>18</sup> Lewis's revival of what was by now a relatively marginal genre may be seen as a fresh attempt to cut through the dominant structures of his cultural surroundings. 'Art will die, perhaps', he speculates in *Men without Art* (1934). 'It can, however, before doing so, paint us a picture of what life looks like without art. That will be, of course, a *satiric* picture' (*MWA* 183). At the heart of Lewis's adoption of satire is a dream of rebirth, a progression towards some sort of recuperation of the self through the violent expulsion of the methods of his contemporaries.

Tyrus Miller describes the middle phase of Lewis's career as a 'curious melange of mimicry and violent rejection'.<sup>19</sup> In 1927, the same year that he attacked Woolf and Hemingway, and described *Ulysses* (1922) as 'a monument like a record diarrhoea' (*TWM* 90), Lewis launched a new publication, aptly entitled *The Enemy*. The first issue contained the following evaluation of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909):

[Stein's] prose-song is a cold, black, suet-pudding. We can represent it as a cold suet-roll of fabulously-reptilian length. Cut it at any point, it is the same thing; the same heavy, sticky, opaque mass all through, and all along. It is weighted, projected, with a

sybylline urge. It is mournful and monstrous, composed of dead and inanimate material. It is all fat, without nerve. (*E1* 82)

The sheer force of this attack is the result of Lewis's treatment of this 'dead and inanimate material' as carrion, feeding on what he deems to be Stein's 'monstrous' body of work. Lewis evokes the stodgy textures of Stein in his layering of modified repetition: 'cold, black suet-pudding', 'cold suet-roll', and 'the same thing; the same', all the while building up to the overt mimicry of the Stein-stutter that emerges in *The Childermass* (1928) and *The Apes of God* (1930).<sup>20</sup> Here, Lewis evokes Stein's 'copiousness' through the *hendiadys* of 'mournful and monstrous', and 'dead and inanimate', near-synonyms clustered in order to emulate the qualities they describe. In contrast to his earlier efforts to 'cli[p] the text to the bone of all fleshy verbiage' (*RA* 139), Lewis's style thickens into satire along a fleshy axis of contiguity in order to expose and deride the self-indulgent qualities that he identifies in the main currents of modernism.

'I enjoy the surface of life', explained Lewis, 'because it conceals the repulsive turbidness of the intestine' (*BB* 9). Lewis's characterizing of satire as an 'externalist' method neatly encompasses his attempts to draw out the 'internalist' vices of modernist contemporaries such as D. H. Lawrence.<sup>21</sup> Yet if satire is a means for Lewis to achieve aesthetic distance from his contemporaries, this is complicated by the fact that satire resembles the sense of taste more than of sight in its extreme closeness to its material. Anne Quéma observes that '[l]ike realism, Lewisian satire is an art of the present and the material. It has the body for chief object of attention'.<sup>22</sup> By using his contemporaries as food, Lewis exposes the reliance of his own body of work on a form of negative sustenance. Fascinated by his own repulsion, Lewis is at times blind to the broader implications of his methods. In what follows, I will attempt to expose the self-destructive impulses behind Lewis's engulfment and regurgitation of a social and cultural milieu to which he had lately become intolerant.

After returning home in 1918 from a stint as a war artist after serving as an artillery officer on the frontline in France, Lewis was ill, penniless, and often hungry. He would later recall that in the aftermath of the War, '[p]ython-like the world required some time – a few years – to digest what had somehow got into it' (*WA* 37), before continuing: 'a social *something* appeared where before there had been *nothing* [original italics]' (*WA* 38). This something partly comprised the Bloomsbury

Group, who, as pacifists, had spent the War in the Sussex countryside securing their position at the centre of artistic and literary production. A popular outcome of the 'inconsequent daubing and dabbling' (AG 122) of enemy-artists such as Roger Fry and Duncan Grant was the still life, a trend that led Lewis to observe dryly in 1919 that '[m]ore apples have been painted during the last fifteen years than have been eaten by painters in as many centuries' (CD 100).<sup>23</sup> Lewis's disdain for Bloomsbury art is reflected in the high volume of food and the dense concentration of meals in *The Apes of God* (1930). In addition to creating an uncomfortable proximity between fictional characters and his artistic contemporaries, Lewis's appropriation of the *roman à clef* genre enabled him to comment upon what he saw as the degenerate state of consumer culture and its destruction of the boundaries between the artist and the art-work.<sup>24</sup> Throughout *The Apes*, the overflow of artistic production, coupled with the deficiency of the artworks that the text's veiled artist-consumers produce, is materialized in the proliferation of food waste.

As a protracted personal assault, *The Apes* is itself an exercise in wasted energy. Published in the wake of the Great Depression, the text is set in 1926, the year of the General Strike. In *Paleface* (1929), Lewis recalls that during the Strike there were '[f]oodstuffs rotting upon the quays' while people were 'starving' (P 274). This was a period in which Lewis could only fantasize about luxuries such as 'really new-laid eggs' (L 217), and the starkness of relative poverty detailed in his letters from the time heightens the atmosphere of decadence in the text. Food is rendered excremental, as characters descend into a state of abjection as a result of their careless greed. At Pamela Farnham's tea party, Clemmie Richmond takes a bite of a chocolate and 'a heavy perfumed stream poured out all over her frock. It was full of liqueur' (AG 210), while at the Finnian-Shaw fancy dress party, in a moment of revelry, 'bad Bordeaux' is spilt down the crotch of the dress of a lady referred to as the Volpemini, staining her thighs (AG 364).

Lewis's attempt to degrade his contemporaries often borders on the puerile, but there is a serious point to be made about the overflow of resources. The narrator refers to the gastric disappointment of characters on a number of occasions, and the topic of conversation inevitably turns to the post-war 'collapse of [...] cuisine' (AG 403). Lewis's social criticism comes to a head in the 'Lenten Party' chapter, a title that highlights the indecorousness of bourgeois indulgence on the brink of austerity. Near the beginning of the chapter, after listing a series

of unappetising *hors d'oeuvres* later said to have been produced 'on the cheap' (AG 546), Lewis reveals that the Finnian-Shaws (based on the Sitwells) are really serving their guests the 'old yellow sauces of the Naughty Nineties', recipes 'from Wildes, Beardsleys and Whistlers' (AG 353). The collapse of culture is figured as a form of regression, with Lord Osmund's 'wheedl[ing of] his old Nineties-nurse for a further slice of victorian cat's meat' (AG 354) a doubly atavistic longing, both for a bygone era of aestheticism and for his own spoon-fed infancy.

While characters dine on gossip and denial, transmuting the 'unpalatable facts of economics [...] into rich and juicy morsels' (AG 544), Lewis's naive young protagonist, Dan Boleyn, based on Bloomsbury artist Stephen Spender, drifts down into the kitchen after beginning to feel nauseous. He is quickly faced with the 'refuse of stomachs. How these armed maggots crawled in this garbage, with heavy voices, overcome by the fumes. A World of bowels. Synecdoche!' (AG 423-24). This moment encapsulates the indigestibility of *The Apes* as a whole, as Lewisian satire appears to be overcome by the fumes of social and cultural decay it is so intent on releasing. Despite claiming to prefer the 'surface of life', Lewis is continually drawn towards the 'repulsive turbidness of the intestine' (BB 9). The final exclamation, 'Synecdoche!', foregrounds an uncomfortable degree of contiguity, not only between the kitchen and the dining room – the *hors d'oeuvres* and the 'refuse' – but also between the text and the 'Hellish' world it exposes. The disorienting aesthetic of the extreme close-up now returns but has turned in on itself; here the text appears intent on dissecting its own methods. Ultimately, the intrusion of this rhetorical figure draws attention to the self-reflectiveness and cultural insularity of a text that attacks from within. Just as the text, by signposting its rhetorical features, lays bare its inner workings, so does it also attempt to expose this insular world. However, in doing so it positions itself deep in the bowels of the cultural milieu that it is seeking to destroy.

It is telling that the 'socially impossible' (AG 296) mouthpiece of Lewis, Pierpoint, whose Encyclical attacks the Bloomsbury elite, does not appear at all in the text. Pierpoint fulfils a fantasy of disembodiment, in which he is able to 'broadcast' (AG 559) his views without engaging in the 'degrading' 'swallowing and evacuating process (self-preservation)' that reduces men to the appearance of 'fools'.<sup>25</sup> The above extract encapsulates the text's self-defeating methods by exposing the way in which the object of satire begins to contaminate the observing subject,

thus further undermining the possibility of artistic autonomy that Pierpoint represents. In *The Apes*, Lewisian satire increasingly resembles wasted energy and self-sabotage. Dan Boleyn later meets a young Blackshirt, Bertram Starr-Smith, who rails against the corruption of bourgeois society before announcing: 'Let us as a symbolical gesture join the servants downstairs, in their hot kitchens and stinking sculleries – they at least are the English and, though servants too, something unspoilt' (AG 528). Dan quietly inverts Starr-Smith's proposition: he 'was in absolute agreement with all Black-shirt had said about *not* going down into the hot kitchen' (AG 528, emphasis added). The young poet squirms in the face of Starr-Smith's '*politics of Revolt*' (AG 530), his digestion 'deranged' (AG 530) by the unappetising combination of feudalism and racial hygiene. To make matters worse, Starr-Smith is revealed to be Pierpoint's political secretary, and is thus closely affiliated with Lewis's polemical mouthpiece. The reader is also faced with feelings of intense discomfort in recognizing the proximity of these views to those of the author. While he is undoubtedly an object of ridicule, at one point admitting that his outfit is more a result of economic expediency than true '*Fascismo*' (AG 509), Starr-Smith is also presented as a triumphant adversary to 'aesthete-politicians' (BB 273) such as Dan. Aligning himself with this fascist diagnostician, Lewis turns to a new form of destructive self-identification: politics.

Less than a year after *The Apes* appeared in print, Lewis published *Hitler* (1931), an enthusiastic account of the Nazi Party leader that confirmed Lewis's political views had hardened to reflect those of the young Blackshirt. The proximity of the two texts in his *corpus* suggests that Lewis's reaction against the main currents of modernism was closely bound up with his rejection of a dominant political ideology. In both cases, an intense aversion to his social and cultural surroundings led Lewis to seek extreme alternatives. *Hitler* often reads like the work of a fantasist, with the extreme disjuncture between the bitterness of *The Apes* and the sickly sweetness of Lewis's spirited defence of this 'Man of Peace' betraying an underlying instability of outlook. More than simply a fantasy, however, *Hitler* appears to have been a severe adverse reaction on the part of Lewis to his failed attempt to transform satire into an 'objective, non-emotional truth' (MWA 99). While the perverse intimacy of satire to its victims had perhaps become too uncomfortable, it is more likely that because *The Apes* did not provoke extreme responses,



Lewis may have felt that his brand of satire had become ineffective, too easy to swallow.<sup>26</sup>

Published in the same year that *The Apes* is set, Lewis's political essay *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) describes social reform as 'today a very fluid, mercurial science' (ABR 17). The text outlines Lewis's impression that left-wing ideology had become watered down and thus ineffectual. A year later, in the same text in which he derided the 'bergsonian fluidity' (TWM 101) of *Ulysses*, Lewis admits to being 'sick to death [...] of many of the forms that "revolution" takes' (TWM 131), wondering 'how can we evade our destiny of being "an opposite," except by becoming some grey mixture, that is in reality just nothing at all?' (TWM 132). Lewis's anxiety about the mixing of oppositional forces resulting in self-dilution again resurfaces, and with it the recognition of the appeal of a doctrine founded on an ideal of purity. At this point in his life and career it seems that only a diet of extremism could protect Lewis from the niggling feeling that, in the absence of an ongoing battle between opposing forces, individual identity would be reduced to a negation.

Although it contained reservations about National Socialism, with Lewis conceding that 'the sort of solution indicated in Hitlerism is not entirely to be despised, though not necessarily to be swallowed whole', (H 124), *Hitler* was widely condemned, and Lewis's reputation struggled to recover. In response to this uncomfortable exposure, the author shifted into a new mode of representation. *Snooty Baronet* (1932), an experiment with first-person narrative, is the product of a satirical gaze that turns from political to personal relations, in turn restoring some of the acute social observation of the early stories. Michael Kell-Imrie, nicknamed 'Snooty', is a wounded war veteran with an artificial leg and a metal plate in his head. Early on in the text, in what appears to be a grotesque reconstitution of Tarr's lunch scene with Bertha, Snooty successfully seduces his mistress Val, despite the fact that she has just admitted to getting an overweight neighbour, aptly named Mort, 'in the bed'. Contemplating their recent encounter, Snooty reflects: 'I could almost perceive the dead weight, of the extinct Mort, sink down to the floor, like a stricken sausage-balloon. [...] I heaved a long sigh at this harrowing spectacle' (SB 33). Moments later, in the lead up to his own *petit-mort* Snooty finds himself:

Squatted upon the extremity of the supper-table, with my live leg (still laden with hearty muscles) I attacked the nether half of my aggressive adversary, and wound it cleverly round her reintegrating fork. (We were now both suspended upon my mechanical limb.) (SB 46)

The live leg on the supper table is reminiscent of Bertha's 'large thigh, with ugly whiteness', on which 'Tarr feasts his eyes as it rests on the dinner table, 'connected with her like a ventriloquist's dummy with its master' (T1 54). Prosthesis is now literalized, however, with Lewis's narrator deprived of his real leg as well as the figurative detachment of simile. Although the now 'stricken' sausage of *satura* rears its head in Snooty's description of Mort, both he and his 'stricken' love-rival share a tragic vulnerability.

For the dyspeptic Lewisian protagonist, any pleasurable sensation quickly congeals into revulsion. Throughout the text, Snooty is frequently sick after sex and eating, yet he continues to seek out these sensations. It is hard not to envisage this ailing writer with an unhealthy sexual appetite as a grotesque parody of his creator. Indeed, there is a curiously self-reflexive poignancy to Snooty's brutal envisaging of the 'extinct Mort', seeing as he is soon mimicking his actions almost *verbatim*. Lewis heightens this uncomfortable proximity by switching the post-coital narrative into the third person to depict a 'one-legged naked man in the sumptuous second-hand Chelsea arm-chair – carrying his hand, as if in pain, to a spot upon the rear portion of his skull', before the final clause reveals somewhat bashfully that this man 'was me' (SB 48).

In a surreal echo of Snooty's spectre of Mort-ality, a sausage balloon also looms large in *Blasting and Bombardiering*. Recalling his time on the Front, covering an observation post, Lewis describes being suddenly overshadowed by an enemy 'Observer' in a German balloon that hovers 'menacingly near' (BB 161). He recalls that the 'last of our party had left terra firma a few yards behind him when the first shell came down. [...] The sausage had seen us!' (BB 163), before admitting 'the bitter taste of stupidity was in my mouth' (BB 64). Sara Crangle suggests that during this moment 'Lewis the satirical observer is now threateningly observed, and he feels his persecution keenly'.<sup>27</sup> The 'too-proximate contact' that the sausage-balloon imposes is compounded by the frightening role-reversal that takes place between observer and observed.<sup>28</sup> This reversal

is echoed in Snooty's imaginings of Mort, and becomes a central preoccupation of Lewis's post-war writing. In both *The Apes of God* and *Snooty Baronet*, a perverse form of imitation results in the horror of self-identification in otherness.

At his observation post, Lewis quickly realized that to do any observing 'was out of the question: all you could do was to hang on to it by the skin of your teeth' (BB 160). This is a plight shared by Snooty as he perches precariously 'upon the extremity of the dinner-table'. It is apt that sex is initiated amid the plates and cutlery, seeing as both parties are being made a meal of here. While keen to foreground the violence of this encounter ('I attacked') by bristling with confident asides about his 'hearty muscles', Snooty soon finds himself suspended on the cruel 'fork' of satire, held out naked at arm's length by Lewis's cold imitation of behaviourism.<sup>29</sup> While the false objectivity of behaviourism is initially satirized by Lewis, Robert Elliot argues that it ends up 'convincing the strategist, as though Swift had turned cannibal'.<sup>30</sup> As a result, although the table holding up Val's 'fleshy rolls' remains intact, the foundations of Lewisian satire are clearly buckling under the strain.

So much of Snooty's body has been replaced with metal that, as the text progresses, the human parts of him increasingly appear as mere chinks in his automaton armour. When a bull mortally wounds his friend McPhail, Snooty finds himself yawning at his deathbed. Despite experiencing feelings of pity for his comrade, Snooty is most disturbed by the fact that his final outburst of pain 'left a nasty taste in my mouth. It suggested pathos' (SB 183). Before beginning *Snooty Baronet*, Lewis wrote revealingly that 'the barriers between the [...] not-self and the self [...] have everywhere been impaired' (TWM 357). Snooty embodies this impairment, with the sudden onslaught of feeling demonstrating the triumph of the 'not-self' over his fortress of antipathy and self-involvement.

Pathos is inimical to satire; as an affective tool it threatens to pierce the armour of the 'non-human outlook' (MWA 99). In the next stage of his career Lewis responds to this threat with a defensive gesture by absorbing pathos into the body of his work. The author's late appeal to the emotions is out of character, and is an uncomfortable (albeit deliberate) departure from form. Let us now turn our attention to the 'red herring' (see RL 140) of realism in Lewis's late work.

**‘an appetite for this negation of life’: The Late Phase**

In the year that he published *The Revenge for Love* (1937), Lewis attempted to purge himself of his former reputation, writing in his war memoir:

Nineteen-thirty-seven is a grand year. We are all in the melting pot. I resist the process of melting so have a very lively time of it. I know if I let myself melt I should get mixed up with all sorts of people I would sooner be dead than mixed into. But that’s the only sense in which I’m conservative. It’s myself I want to conserve. (BB 15)

The struggle to obtain a sense of distance from an environment ‘saturated with politics’ (WA 19) continues to overshadow Lewis’s writing. Here the author’s liquidation of ideology is an evasive strategy, his alteration of the definition of the cognate ‘conserve’ part of an attempt to transform his now much-maligned political reputation. Lewis’s strategic manipulation of form extends to his at times somewhat unsettling absorption of elements of realism into his late fiction. Realism, which in the aftermath of the First World War had become a vehicle for socialist ideology, was in many ways the enemy of aesthetic autonomy for Lewis.<sup>31</sup> In the aftermath of the First World War, Soviet writers such as Maxim Gorky and Karl Radek began to champion realism as a vehicle for left-wing ideology. Although socialist realism never became a fully established genre of British literature, as Peter Marks notes, its spectre loomed large in the work of British writers including W. H. Auden, Naomi Mitchison, and Cecil Day Lewis during the thirties.<sup>32</sup> Remaining true to his tendency toward contrariness, Lewis’s turn to realism, despite the possible socialist connotations of this literary genre during the thirties, can be interpreted as both a renewal and a disavowal of the politics of form.

In 1938, Gaston Bachelard likened realism to gluttony, characterizing the myth of digestion as an ‘epistemological obstacle’, an immanent and yet fallacious thought structure inherited from a pre-scientific age:

digestion corresponds to taking possession of a fact that is more obvious than any other and whose certainty cannot be questioned. Digestion is the origin of the strongest kind of realism. Its

entire coenaesthesia lies at the root of the myth of inwardness. This “interiorisation” helps us to postulate an “interiority”. Realists are eaters.<sup>33</sup>

Like Lewis, Bachelard appears to suggest that indigestion is the inevitable outcome of any attempt to draw the outside world into conformity with individual subjectivity. It is therefore striking that, in accordance with his apparent embrace of realism in the late 1930s, Lewis’s characters appear to successfully internalize their surroundings, becoming smug eaters. If, in the middle phase of Lewis’s career, food is utilized to expose the inauthenticity of certain social and cultural institutions, in the late novels this process extends to the institution of literature itself.

Lewis’s late novels are pervaded by an atmosphere of secrecy. Towards the beginning of *The Revenge for Love* (1937), a local girl, Josefa, brings a basket of provisions to Percy Hardcaster, a ‘red patriarch’ (RL 140) incarcerated in Cadiz in the lead up to the Spanish Civil War. After being asked by prison warder Don Alvaro whether there is anything in the basket she replies ‘Nothing! Food!’ (RL 22). But beneath these ‘mere provisions’ lies a secret compartment containing foreign newspapers and a letter containing details of Percy’s escape plan. The food thus belies the plot, creating the first of many ‘false bottoms’ in the novel ‘underlying every seemingly solid surface’ (RL 154).<sup>34</sup> My suggestion is that in Lewis’s late fiction, food forms part of a subterranean system of meaning that is hinted at but never fully exposed.

Lewis would later describe his protagonist Percy Hardcaster, a thinly veiled self-portrait with whom he shares a first name, as ‘a plumber who has to deceive the householder sometimes: has to sabotage perhaps the bourgeois drainage system’ (RA 230). If in Lewis’s analogy the householder is the reader, the drainage system resembles a literary market awash with left-wing orthodoxy. Percy is the first to admit when challenged by his communist disciple Gillian that his role is really that of a profit-making propagandist, and his underlying hypocrisy exposes the false politics of ‘parlour pinks’ (RL 140) as well as the commercial opportunism behind what is ‘ostensibly the politics of marxist [*sic*] revolution’ (WA 47). To drive this point home, Lewis literally exposes his protagonist’s inner workings, locating the confounding of ideologies within the digestive tract (the human drainage system) of his bloated body. As Percy lies wounded in hospital he

informs fellow revolutionary Virgilio that the vertical classes of capitalism are preferable to the horizontal classes of fascism. Virgilio responds bluntly that all class should be abolished. Momentarily thwarted, Percy takes a mouthful of food:

He found it difficult to digest his food in the horizontal position, and he had to get a little cross in order to shake it down. [...] A belch or two had announced its downward drift. (RL 55)

The subtle echoing of Percy's ideological axes in his bodily posture exposes the forces of digestion, both corporeal and textual, that aid Lewis's subversive overeater. Establishing a binary opposition between the axes of capitalism and fascism, Percy demonstrates that internally these forces are working together, both to satiate this greedy opportunist who has been 'forced into politics by poverty' (RL 50), and to present communism as a palatable alternative.

As Gian-Paolo Biasin argues in *The Flavors of Modernity*, alimentary referents are part of a system of narrative realism that presents characters as embodied entities in need of sustenance.<sup>35</sup> The presence of indigestion disrupts this system, drawing attention to a deeper and more problematic level of meaning. Not only does the word 'cross' convey anger, it also foregrounds the intersection of these 'classes' conveniently erected by Percy 'in order to shake [...] down' (i.e. both to conceal and digest) his self-serving socialism. In a similar crossover, Lewis announced his own politics to be 'partly communist and partly fascist, with a distinct streak of monarchism in [his] marxism, but at bottom anarchist with a healthy passion for order' (E3 70). The mingling of ideologies in the body of his protagonist is suggestive of Lewis's efforts both to obfuscate and dilute these categories, transforming them into the same 'grey mixture' he had previously been afraid of discovering was the true material of 'life'.

In an attempt to distance himself from political controversy Lewis turns to a form of representation with a mixed history. As a literary genre realism has developed somewhat paradoxical associations; it has been accused of 'inherent conservatism' and yet it has also been characterized as a vehicle of socialist ideology.<sup>36</sup> In *The Writer and the Absolute*, Lewis alleges that 'suppression and boycott' at the hands of the establishment forced him into this mould (WA 8), and yet conveniently, like Josefa's food-basket, realism has a false bottom. To quote Andrzej

Gąsiorek, in presenting language 'as a transparent tool through which to view an external world', it denies the opacity of its materials as well as the contradictory elements of the world it claims to represent.<sup>37</sup>

This atmosphere of secrecy and denial becomes increasingly apparent in Lewis's later, more overtly realist novel, *Self Condemned* (1954). Early on in the text, René Harding takes his wife Hester to a local restaurant to inform her that he has quit his job as a history professor. He loses his nerve, and, as though compensating for this timidity with a sudden recklessness, abandons 'his plan for a somewhat austere meal' (SC 31) in favour of a 'lavish repast':

As if escaping from something, he gave himself up almost childishly to the delights of the table. [...] By the time he was through with this meal he gave up all idea of explaining to Hester that he had planned a change of life. (SC 32)

For the reader of Lewis, suspicion should immediately be aroused by the fact that, in a radical departure from form, a character is actually enjoying a meal. The narration compounds this atmosphere of suspicion by hiding behind a veneer of self-imposed ignorance in the qualification of 'as if' and 'almost'. There is none of the earlier closeness and discomfort that characterizes the eating scenes between Bertha and Tarr, or Snooty and Val. Food is complicit in the process of denial: by stuffing his mouth, René wilfully obstructs the more painful realization not only that he can no longer retreat inside himself, but that his notion of the self can no longer cohere into something resembling a place of refuge from the world.

A victim of the myth of digestion, René's academic career has made him over-reliant on his own 'inwardness' and unable to fully absorb his surroundings. An extreme manifestation of his creator, when René tries to engage with another human being he 'left simmering as it were, in the background of his mind, the dominant problem, in the way that a housewife reduces to a simmer something she has in hand' (SC 7). *Self Condemned* imitates this principle: there is always something on the backburner, be it the impending war, the more subdued affair of Hester's growing unhappiness, or Lewis's thinly veiled attempts to defend his earlier political views.

Fredric Jameson argues that while the text does 'withhold' material, its 'unconscious material rises dangerously close to the

surface.<sup>38</sup> Set retrospectively in the lead up to the Second World War, the text simultaneously serves up and withholds its author's experiences. The result is a fluctuation between verbal diarrhoea and stylistic parsimony that is reminiscent of the oscillation between extreme closeness and distance in Lewis's early stories. Early on in the text the narrator appears eager to inform the reader that the Harding's housekeeper Mrs Harradson later 'plunged down the stairs and was killed', before hinting of 'foul play'. The narrator then reports cryptically: '[a] pail of water and a brush made it plain what she had been doing' (SC 14). The implication of the phrase 'made plain' is unsettling: either it is plain that she was just washing the stairs and slipped, or this explanation is *made* plain afterwards, fabricated by someone else in the aftermath of a more sinister event. This ambiguity highlights just how unsettling the textures of the obvious are in the hands of Lewis. In light of the fact that *Self Condemned* is both a disavowal of history and a retrospective account of the Second World War, Lewis appears to be foregrounding the necessary distortions that occur when attempting to render the world 'plain' to the onlooker. And yet this is precisely the endeavour of realism, Lewis's chosen form of representation. A possible explanation is offered by Maud Ellman's study of hunger narratives in twentieth-century literature:

The genesis of secrecy may also be attributed to eating, for it is well known that the best way to keep a secret it to *eat* the evidence. The stomach is a place almost as private as the grave.<sup>39</sup>

While modernism is often associated with inwardness and solipsism, it is less easily acknowledged that realism has its own privacies and privations.

Reflecting the wartime reality of Lewis and his wife, the Hardings emigrate to Canada, and as resources (namely food) become scarce, the reality of life confined to a small room in a dysfunctional hotel sets in. Starved of the sustenance of his academic life René develops 'an appetite for this negation of life' (SC 245), insisting that they remain in the hotel in the full knowledge that Hester is consumed by a sense of despair. Just as René's indulgence of his morbid appetite exhibits a strain of masochism, Lewis's turn to realism could be read as a self-imposed death sentence to his most enlivening formal methods. This death sentence extends to the text's attack on its own mode of repres-



entation. During their Atlantic voyage, René opens *Middlemarch* upon recommendation, only to throw it into the sea in disgust at its ‘sodden satire, its lifeless realism’ (SC 156). By this point he has already given a brutal digested read of *Princess Casamassima* over breakfast with Hester. Once again, in an instance of brutal self-satire Lewis presents the reader with a form that is rendered indigestible by its content.<sup>40</sup>

Although the ‘lifeless realism’ of *Self Condemned* is a far cry from the raw textures of the early stories, in the post-war gloom something was indeed ‘simmering in the background’ for Lewis. In 1951, *The Childermass* (1928), a metaphysical allegory in which two old school friends, Pullman (Pulley) and Satterthwaite (Satters), navigate the battlefield of purgatory, was broadcast as a radio play. Lewis, who was now almost totally blind, wrote to the scriptwriter, D. G. Bridson, expressing his delight at hearing it ‘spring into concrete life’, attaining ‘an almost startling physical reality’.<sup>41</sup> He began work on two sequels, which together form an incomplete tetralogy entitled *The Human Age*. Published in 1955, *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* mark the revival of an enlivening tension between the formation and the negation of self-identity in Lewis’s body of work.

### **‘Dis-taste’: *The Human Age***

If Lewisian realism increasingly came to resemble a paradox of unreality, then *The Childermass* (1928) inverts this process. Initially at least, Lewis’s absorption of allegory into his body of work provides him with stable parameters in which to reflect on what Fredric Jameson identifies as the central preoccupation of his middle period: ‘the loss of reality in modern life’.<sup>42</sup> Like Pierpoint in *The Apes of God*, Pulley and Satters represent a fantasy of disembodiment: in this peripheral realm located just outside of heaven there is none of that ‘filling-up and evacuating of your stupid body’ (C 226). After being ‘cooked in this posthumous odyssey’ (C 134) they are left unencumbered by materiality and free to contemplate their metaphysical identity.

Lewis’s return to the allegorical realm of *The Childermass* at the end of his career may be read in the light of his inevitable failure to master realism as a form of distantiation. As Paul de Man observes in *Insight and Blindness*, his study of the tension between rhetoric and meaning, allegory is formed out of ‘a conflict between a conception of a self seen in its

authentically temporal predicament and a defensive strategy that tries to hide from negative self-knowledge'.<sup>43</sup> In *The Childermass* there is a fruitful recognition of this tension that enables the reader to reflect upon the quest for a coherent self. Pulley and Satters are elevated into an atemporal (or post-temporal) realm, yet they spend the majority of their time trying to decide which of the personalities at war with purgatory's ruler the Bailiff – all of whom represent the dominant political ideologies of the world below – they want to support. Rhetorical debates quickly degenerate into troubling displays of physical force, with Macrob, 'the most real of these imperfectly formed men', violently dismembered, literally chewed up and spat out by a rabid crowd.<sup>44</sup>

The continual encroachment of the corporeal world on to this metaphysical sphere becomes an allegory for reading Lewis's body of work as a whole. Despite no longer needing to eat or drink, Satters suffers from 'diabolical indigestion' (C 70). In *Monstre Gai*, after being led to understand that they have reached heaven, the pair are instead faced with a banal earthly hinterland, a 'Not Heaven' in which they regain aspects of their previously embodied state, including an insatiable appetite. Pulley, now the sole protagonist, is left feeling only 'half alive' (HA 86) in a 'half material' (HA 163) world. Soon after he arrives in the 'Third City, a violent storm leaves everything 'upside-down', and all that is clear in this negated absolute is that 'this was *not* here, or that was *not* there' (HA 60, original italics).

Pulley's gradual descent into Hell, or 'Dis', is consistent with the final transformation undergone by Lewis's body of work. As the physical parameters of the afterlife continue to expand and break apart, so does the possibility of a coherent self, purged of its corporeal limitations, become increasingly remote. The narrator admits that in Hell the 'aggressive suggestiveness of a nothingness which continually grew in intensity was of course not to [Pulley's] taste' (HA 316). This now rather weary concession to distaste suggests that this is the course that the Lewisian protagonist is inexorably drawn towards. And yet the self-evident tone of the phrase 'of course' also indicates that from beginning to end there is, of course, a coherent self to be found in Lewis's work. Lewis's protagonists together comprise a collective singularity of vision, as again and again they find themselves rendered powerless, not only by the external world, but by a self-destructive tendency that forces us to reflect on their author's ongoing predilection for Dis-taste.

It is only by reaching the end of Lewis's body of work that it is possible to discover what was there all along. In the second short story Lewis ever published, 'Some Innkeepers and Bestre' (1909), Ker-Orr concludes:

I have noticed that the more cramped and meagre [Bestre's] action has been, the more exuberant and exaggerated his account of the affair is afterwards, as a man escaping from a period of bondage and physical or mental restriction bursts into riot and dissipation; [...].

[H]e has the common impulse of avenging that self that was starved and humiliated by the reality, in glorifying and satiating the self that exists by his imagination. (*CWB* 232)

Ker-Orr's insight into Bestre's underlying motivation hints at self-identification in otherness. Moreover, this is an eerily prophetic distillation of Lewis's pursuit of negative sources of sustenance in response to feelings of injustice and deprivation. The Lewisian text is an adverse reaction not dissimilar to nausea or indigestion that 'bursts' forth from a restricted space; ultimately, it is the mark of a maligned and often vulnerable self-identity that is attempting to escape the oppressive confines of its social, cultural, and political surroundings. Lewis's 'exuberant and exaggerated' account of Bestre is a far more coherent definition of his own processes than this study could ever hope to achieve, and it is an uncomfortable sensation to realize that, right from the start, regardless of the lack of self-distance, Lewis has a superior grasp of his own processes. Yet in light of what we now know about the author's processes, discomfort is perhaps the sign that we're getting closer.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on his early style, Lewis notes 'this surface obtuseness, on the one hand, and [the] unexpected fruit which it miraculously bore' (*RA* 126).

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Tarr's drink with Hobson at the Café Berne in which they disagree about the nature of sexual appetites (*T1* 22-35); Kreisler's uncomfortable meal with an old patron, Volker, in which he asks to borrow more money (*T1* 87-90); Bertha's competition with her roommate, Clara, for space in her kitchen as she makes breakfast (*T1* 168-69); Kreisler's meal at the Restaurant Lejeune with Anastasya, during which he behaves as

though he has ‘indigestion’ (T1 96-106); Kreisler’s argument with Suzanne over money as she makes lunch (T1 110); Kreisler’s greedy participation in the buffet at the Bonnington Club dance, during which he insults his hostess (T1 158); Kreisler’s challenging of Solyk to a duel by sending him a challenge via a waiter in the Café Souchet (T1 258-59 and 263-64); Tarr’s meal of oysters and kisses with Anastasya, during which they argue about the categories of art and life (T1 299-305); and Tarr’s and Anastasya’s meal in Montmartre, during which he casually informs her that he has married Bertha (T1 318-20).

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Edwards, ‘Wyndham Lewis and the Uses of Shellshock: Meat and Postmodernism’, in Andrzej Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker, and Nathan Waddell (eds), *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011): 223-40. See also Toby Avarad Foshay, who argues that in a later scene between Tarr and his lover Anastasya she uses food as a trap, causing Tarr ‘to tie himself up in the static and essentially unworkable dualism of his intellectual aesthetic’ (*Wyndham Lewis and the Avant-Garde: The Politics of the Intellect* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 59-60).

<sup>4</sup> Ian Patterson, ‘Beneath the Surface: Apes, Bodies and Readers’, in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Volcanic Heaven: Essays on Wyndham Lewis’s Painting and Writing* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1996): 123-35, 126.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2-6 and 75.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 249.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Negation’ (1925), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud – Volume XIX (1923-1925): ‘The Ego and the Id’ and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Vintage, 2001): 235-39, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010), 49.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000) and Hugh Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis* (London: Methuen, 1954). There is, however, an anomalous text in Lewis’s middle period that problematizes a chronological approach. *The Childermass* (1928) is the first part of a metaphysical trilogy that was continued after a gap of nearly thirty years, and will therefore be considered alongside its sequels, *Monstre Gai* (1955) and *Malign Fiesta* (1955).

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Chapman, *Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires* (London: Vision Press, 1973), 55; and Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on the Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 71.

<sup>12</sup> In 'Unlucky for Pringle' the portmanteau scene reads: 'To undo and let loose upon the rooms his portmanteaus' squashed and wrinkled contents, like a flock of birds and pack of dogs, [...] was a martyrdom for him. The unwearied optimism of these inanimate objects, how they occupied stolidly and quickly room after room was appalling. Then they still had the staleness of the former room about them' (CWB 304). In *Tarr* the passage appears in the same way, but rather than inducing feelings of martyrdom these objects 'taxed [Tarr's] character to the breaking point' (T1 204).

<sup>13</sup> Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari characterize molar structures as the larger tangible forces that determine the fate of individuals, such as the church or the state, and molecular structures as the more imperceptible factors that shape the life of the individual, such as belief or desire. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 249-52.

<sup>15</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (1979; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2008), 64-65.

<sup>16</sup> Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Charles A. Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 16 and 24.

<sup>18</sup> See Robert C. Elliott, 'Twentieth-Century Magic', in *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960): 223-236, 223.

<sup>19</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 76.

<sup>20</sup> For an example of the Stein-stutter in action see AG 420. Satters also 'steins' in *The Childermass* (see C 37).

<sup>21</sup> Lewis attacks D. H. Lawrence's 'internalist' methods in his essay 'In Praise of Outsiders' (1934; CHCH 201). In the same year he describes satire as an 'externalist' method in 'The Satirist and the Physical World' (CHCH 210).

<sup>22</sup> Anne Quéma, *The Agon of Modernism: Wyndham Lewis's Allegories, Aesthetics, and Politics* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1999), 142.

<sup>23</sup> For examples of Bloomsbury still-life paintings, see Jans Ondaatje Rolls, *The Bloomsbury Cookbook: Recipes for Life, Love and Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Lewis uses food to demonstrate the degradation of the boundaries between artist and artwork in Julian Hyde's claim that 'there ought in fact to be a Zoo where all the Beethovens, Mozarts and so on could be shut up. We could go and take them buns of a Sunday afternoon, or watch them fed! – The question of food is most important. There are many works of art that we should understand far better than we do if we could watch their author at feeding-time – in a *genius-house*, at a Zoo' (AG 296-97).

<sup>25</sup> Lewis quoted in Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (1980; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 89.

<sup>26</sup> According to Jeffrey Meyers, many of Lewis's victims, including Stephen Spender and Roy Campbell, 'soon forgave Lewis's satire and renewed their friendship' thus undermining his intention to distance himself from his artistic contemporaries. Campbell, despite recognizing a portrait of himself in Zulu Blades, even wrote an enthusiastic review of the text that was rejected by the *New Statesman* for being too favourable. See Meyers, *The Enemy*, 180-82. Paul O'Keeffe writes of the 'generally favourable press reception' of the text, adding: 'Of all the victims of *The Apes of God*, Richard Wyndham was perhaps the most seriously offended by Lewis's satirical treatment of him. When the two men chanced to meet in a restaurant shortly after publication, Lewis reported with disingenuous understatement that the other "did not seem happy"' (*Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 292 and 293). Virginia Woolf did not respond publicly to *The Apes*, but wrote tetchily in her diary that the pamphlet by Lewis that followed it, 'Satire and Fiction', was 'like the gossip & spite & bickering of a suburban housemaid who has been given notice & is getting a bit of her own back' (*The Diary of Virginia Woolf – Volume III: 1925-30*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Penguin, 1982), 323-34).

<sup>27</sup> Sara Crangle, 'The Furious Martyrdoms of Wyndham Lewis', *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 5 (2014): 31-59, 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> For more on Lewis's behaviourism see Peter Scott Stanfield, "'This Implacable Doctrine': Behaviorism in Wyndham Lewis's *Snoopy Baronet*", *Twentieth-Century Literature* 47. 2 (Summer 2001): 241-67. See also Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012), 65-94.

<sup>30</sup> Elliott, *The Power of Satire*, 236-37.

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<sup>31</sup> For a defence of ‘socialist realism’, see Gyorgy Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 93-135.

<sup>32</sup> See Peter Marks, ‘Illusion and Reality: The Spectre of Socialist Realism in Thirties Literature’, in Keith Williams and Stephen Matthews (eds), *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997): 23-36.

<sup>33</sup> Gaston Bachelard, ‘The Myth of Digestion’, in *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2002): 172-84, 172. First published 1938.

<sup>34</sup> In *Rude Assignment* Lewis reveals that *The Revenge for Love* was originally called ‘False Bottoms’ (RA 229).

<sup>35</sup> Gian-Paolo Biasin, *The Flavors of Modernity: Food and the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the ‘inherent conservatism’ of realism see Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9 and 12-13. For a discussion of the relationship between social realism and Marxist ideology see Evgeniĭ Aleksandrovich Dobrenko, ‘Socialism as Will and Representation’, 11-20.

<sup>37</sup> Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 9.

<sup>38</sup> Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 145.

<sup>39</sup> Maud Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993), 39 (original italics).

<sup>40</sup> And yet, according to Jeffrey Meyers, this was Lewis’s most commercially successful novel (‘*Self Condemned*’, in Jeffrey Meyers (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis: A Revaluation* (London: The Athlone Press, 1980): 226-37, 226.

<sup>41</sup> D. G. Bridson, ‘*The Human Age* in Retrospect’, in Meyers (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis: A Revaluation*: 238-51, 238.

<sup>42</sup> Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*, 123.

<sup>43</sup> Paul de Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1993): 187-228, 207-8. First published 1971.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted from the dust-jacket description of *The Childermass* written by Lewis for the 1956 edition. The original typescript is in the Wyndham Lewis Collection, Cornell University. See Alan Munton, ‘A Reading of *The Childermass*’, in Meyers (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis: A Revaluation*: 120-32, n. 13 (p. 259).